

MANAGING URBAN WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

In late March, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department received a report of a mountain lion sighting on the south side of Mandan, a city of some 16,000 people located across the Missouri River from Bismarck. While most mountain lion sightings these days receive some sort of followup, this one got the full treatment because of its proximity to an urban area.

Biologists analyzed tracks in the mud and other circumstances, and determined conclusively that the animal sighted was NOT a mountain lion, but rather an at-large dog.

Such mistaken identities are not unusual. This sighting occurred at night, with the running animal illuminated, quite some distance away, by vehicle lights. But it would not have been a surprise to wildlife officials if it was a mountain lion. Western North Dakota has mountain lions, and while they typically shy away from contact with humans, in other states they are occasionally seen on the outskirts of cities and towns and near rural housing developments.

If the animal had been verified as a mountain lion, here's what would have happened: If the tracks led away from town and there was no indication the lion had been hanging around for awhile, no further action would have occurred.

If evidence was found that the mountain lion had likely been in the area for awhile, or if it didn't appear that it had left the area, the Game and Fish Department would have hired a professional trapper with dogs, or brought in USDA Wildlife Services experts to track the mountain lion until it was treed or otherwise chased into a position where it could be killed.

This is the Game and Fish Department's policy for dealing with mountain lions that are considered an immediate threat to people. Most people are comfortable with this policy, though some would oppose it based on the premise that an animal's presence near a city is not reason enough to kill it.

But when it comes to dealing with wildlife in urban settings, especially those for which danger to humans is a concern, policies and decisions can't be based on public popularity. Biology and potential risk are the most important factors and sometimes there is not a clear answer as to the best way to handle a given situation, and the time frame for making the decision is often short.

A good example occurred in Fargo three years ago after a cow moose and her calf wandered into town – not just to the edge of town, but right into the residential center of the city's south side, with major traffic arteries close by in all four directions. A local radio station was broadcasting the location of the moose and people started showing up at the same time the noon hour rush was underway. The animals had been grazing near Fargo South High School, and a group of students pressured the moose into moving.

As the two moose diverted through the neighborhoods, bystanders would try to surround them. When the moose

would stop, pressure from several media crews would get them started again. Finally, exhausted, the two moose took a rest in a residential back yard.

Moose are not inherently dangerous animals. However, an adult cow can weigh more than 1,000 pounds, and any wild animal, no matter how docile they appear in their natural habitat, can lash out at a human, or perhaps try to run through a crowd, if they feel cornered or threatened. Female animals trying to protect their young are even more unpredictable.

In the middle of the afternoon, with the rest of the city going about its daily business, Fargo police decided, with Game and Fish and State Highway Patrol support, to shoot the two moose and eliminate risks that would have come with a different decision.

Perhaps if the crowd of onlookers and media had dispersed and the moose would have been left alone, the two animals would have continued to move along and eventually found their way back into the wild. Perhaps, if a biologist or veterinarian trained in the use of a tranquilizer gun had been immediately available, the two moose could have been drugged and safely moved out of town.

Certainly, these alternatives have been used in cases in other parts of the country, and it's legitimate for people to wonder why they weren't part of the final decision in the Fargo case. The answer lies in an assessment of risk vs. benefits vs. availability of personnel and equipment to do the job.

If left alone in a residential neighborhood or herded toward the edge of town, the moose posed a real danger to traffic and to innocent bystanders. It's one thing to hit a deer with a vehicle, it's quite another to hit a moose.

Imagine the response of a motorist injured in a collision with a moose when he or she discovered that the moose was being chased across the road by wildlife and police officers. Imagine the response of a parent whose child was trampled by a moose running through a back yard, when the Game and Fish Department or other agency had a chance to eliminate the risk ... and they didn't.

At the same time, tranquilization is not an exact science nor an option in every situation. Drugged animals sometimes take off wildly when the dose is not quite strong enough for the size of the animal. Drugged animals sometimes die when the dose is too strong or the tranquilizer dart, which is supposed to hit the large muscle mass of the upper hind leg, misses its mark. At the time, there wasn't an experienced person available to attempt tranquilization within the decision-making time frame.

Had the decision been postponed a little longer, maybe the tranquilizer route would have worked out. Or maybe it would have made things worse. It's a tough call.

The decision to shoot the moose was widely second-guessed by private citizens and some media. At the same time, many other citizens and media outlets, while certainly disappointed that two stately wild animals got

caught up in an unfortunate circumstance, supported the decision based on the potential public safety risk.

The following winter, a similar incident occurred in another town. A cow moose with a calf took up temporary residence in a wooded and mostly undeveloped area of Minot. Since the immediate public safety threat wasn't considered high, they were more or less left alone, except for curious onlookers and media attention. No effort was made to try to herd them out of town.

However, when the calf ventured onto an outlying busy road and was struck by a vehicle and eventually died, Minot city and Game and Fish officials decided to attempt tranquilization and move the cow, rather than allow it to remain at large and risk another incident. With adequate time to prepare, and Game and Fish staff who had been trained in the process the previous summer, the moose was effectively tranquilized and transported to the Lonetree Wildlife Management Area in Sheridan and Wells counties.

Not all, in fact, not very many urban wildlife conflicts involve imminent safety risks. Several years ago, Game and Fish Department biologists were approached by a wildlife club based in Logan County, about transplanting turkeys to the area around Napoleon. Game and Fish decided against it because the only adequate turkey habitat in the area was the trees in town and around area farmsteads.

Some years later, the Department received a call from a Napoleon city official complaining about all the turkeys in town that Game and Fish had transferred to the area. Upon further investigation, Game and Fish learned that someone from the local area had, without Department approval, released turkeys anyway and they had multiplied to the point they became a nuisance in town during winter.

Rather than go in and lethally remove or net the turkeys, Game and Fish created a new turkey hunting zone that encompassed a big chunk of the state that previously was not open to turkey hunting. This unit is now familiar to hunters as the "R" unit where isolated pockets of turkeys exist. Apparently, hunters have exerted enough pressure on these Napoleon birds so the complaints have subsided.

A similar approach is in the works for north Fargo, where deer numbers within the city limits have grown to a point that has exceeded the tolerance level of many of the residents. To try to reduce the deer population, the city of Fargo is developing a system for allowing bowhunting within the city limits in certain areas starting this fall.

The Fargo hunt is modeled after an urban bowhunting season that has been in place in south Bismarck for nearly 10 years, and has indeed reduced the city deer population to a level that most residents find tolerable.

Some urban residents want wild animals in their back yards. Others don't. And sometimes wild animals in urban settings take on a much greater significance than a garden

raided by a deer or rabbit. In these cases, there's usually more than one option for dealing with the situation, and that's why it's a good idea from time to time to take a look at some of the factors that might influence these important decisions, *From Both Sides*.

One Side

- The Game and Fish Department, for the most part, manages wildlife by population, not individual animals. While no one wants to kill wildlife that has become a public safety hazard, the loss of an animal or two will not typically affect the overall species population.

- While Game and Fish and agencies in other states have guidelines for handling urban wildlife conflicts, most cases have differing circumstances that influence decisions. Similar events could have completely different outcomes depending on where and when the situation developed.

- Most adults age 30 and over watched "Wild Kingdom" and have the perception that tranquilizing wild animals is a relatively smooth process. It is not always as easy or successful as an edited television program makes it appear.

- People – curious citizens and media – often complicate the process for solving urban wildlife conflicts. When safety is a concern, people should make sure authorities are aware of the situation, then stay out of the way until the matter is resolved.

The Other Side

- Wildlife officials should not kill wildlife in urban settings unless all other options have been tried and didn't work, or if an animal is actually threatening public safety, not just that it is a potential safety threat.

- Animals in urban settings that are not safety threats should be left alone. People who live along city edges and in housing developments should expect wildlife in their area and take responsibility for protecting gardens, trees, etc., and not calling on wildlife agencies to remove animals that are causing damage.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.

Moose creating chaos

One of the animals was involved in a collision with car near Edison School

